COVID-19 and the social impact of its outbreak

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15/04/2020

Introduction

COVID-19, a novel coronavirus that became known to affect humans a few months ago while spreading in the Chinese city of Wuhan, has rapidly spread across the globe (Singh, R. & Adhikari, R., 2020). The World Health Organization has declared it to be a pandemic, due the rapid increase in the number of cases outside China and the number of countries that have been affected (WHO, 2020). In the absence of a vaccine, social distancing has emerged as the most effective and as such the most widely adopted strategy for its containment (Singh, R. & Adhikari, R., 2020). Social distancing includes the suppression of social contacts at workplaces, schools and other public spheres. “Stay at home” campaign has been adopted by an increasing number of governments around the world, encouraging citizens to stay at home and minimize their physical contact with others to the absolutely necessary, such as going out for food and other first aid supplies. Many

countries that have been severely affected by this virus have implemented a number of restrictions, such as forbidding by law unnecessary social contact and declaring national lockdowns. The target of this article is to attempt a first study on the social impact of COVID-19's outbreak and the ways it affects citizens' everyday life.

Incidents of xenophobia and racism

Even though there is no official scientific research confirming the following information, it seems that a number of incidents of racism and xenophobia have taken place, mostly, against people of Asian descent. Incidents of suspicion, fear or hostility have been observed and reported in many countries, especial the countries of the so-called "western world". However, as the virus keeps spreading around the globe, incidents of racism have been taking place not only in the West and between a country's citizens and foreigners, but also among people of the same ethnic group. In this case the reason someone becomes "the other" or the "dangerous one" isn't based on a person's ethnicity but on the fear that they've been affected by the virus and they are now spreading it. People from Wuhan and its environs, perhaps remain as the most striking example, as they have been ostracized throughout the rest of China (Burton, N., 2020).

However, it's not the first time that xenophobia is being intertwined with the discourse concerning public health issues. Contagious diseases have been linked with "the outsiders" several times. Throughout history, minority or "outcast" groups have been blamed for the spread of several infectious disease. For instance, in Europe of the Middle Ages Jews and gypsies were among those accused of spreading the deadly bubonic plague (Greenberg, S. H., 2015). In a similar way, during this new pandemic certain people or group of people are being discriminated due to them being infected by the

novel or coronavirus or due to them being believed to be infected, and thus spreading it around.

Misinformation, fake news and panic spreading

A few weeks after the emergence of the novel coronavirus became known to the general public, misleading rumours and conspiracy theories about the origin of this virus started circulating the globe. “Not only did the virus itself spread very rapidly, but so did the information – and misinformation – about the outbreak, and thus the panic that it created among the public. The social media panic traveled faster than the COVID-19 spread” (Depoux, A., Martin, S., Karafillakis, E., Preet, R., Wilder-Smith, A. & Larson, H., 2020).

According to a recent research that was conducted on Twitter’s posts, “medical misinformation and unverifiable content pertaining to the global COVID-19 epidemic are being propagated at an alarming rate on social media”. From a 673 tweets 446 (66.6 %) were posted by informal individuals or groups. They were followed by 111 tweets coming from news outlets or journalists (16.5%). Of all accounts, 129 (19.2%) were Twitter verified accounts. What’s more, the majority of tweets included serious content (91.2%), with information concerning the COVID-19 pandemic (81.4%), and only 41 tweets (6.1%) included humorous content. The topics that were most frequently recorded were medical and public health (69.5%), followed by sociopolitical (40.0%) and financial (5.6%). What’s alarming about this study’s conclusions is that after excluding humorous and posts that don’t fall into “serious content” category, 153 tweets (24.8%) included misinformation, and 107 (17.4%) included unverifiable information. When analyzing Twitter accounts by user category, informal personal/group accounts had more misinformation when compared to other (33.8% vs 15.0%). The authors conclude that the rate of misinformation and

unverifiable information is alarmingly high, while some tweets or Twitter account characteristics were seen to be associated with a higher chance of spreading unverifiable and false information (Kouzy, R., Jaoude J. A., Kraitem, A., El Alam, M. B., Karam, B., Adib, E., Zarka, J., Traboulsi, C., Akl, E. W. & Baddour, K., 2020).

So far, there isn't a single strategy that can prevent all types of misinformation, in particular amongst the skeptical ones. Educational campaigns and official resources are important, but often limited, proving to be inadequate in fighting misconceptions as they craft messages based on what they want to promote, without addressing the already existing perceptions. That's the reason why dialogue matters the most and strategies should include public engagement (Larson, H. J., 2018).

Outbreak's impact on the socio-economic field

Public health constitutes a fundamental basis for the prosperity and productivity of a society. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 disease has led to a number of significant consequences on economies and public health at a global level. It has been estimated that, without urgent global measures to contain the virus in time, the global economy is expected to lose over $280 billion in the first quarter of 2020 (Evans, O., 2020).

Furthermore, the novel coronavirus outbreak resulted in several instances of supply shortages globally due to panic buying, as well as the increased usage of medical equipment such as surgical masks, gloves and hand sanitisers. Another significant sideffect of this outbreak has been the disruption of factories and logistic operations (FDA, 2020).

Tourism seems to be one of the most affected sectors due to travel restrictions, the closing of public places such as tourist attractions, and advice of governments against any travel around the world. The United

Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has underlined a decline in international arrivals and receipts in 2020. While re-estimating 2020 prospects for international tourist arrivals UNWTO has concluded to a likely negative growth of 1% to 3%. This would probably mean an estimated loss of 30 to 50 billion US$ in international tourism receipts (Evans, O., 2020).

Unemployment has been emerging as another vital problem caused by COVID-19 pandemic. Since January 2020 millions of people have lost their jobs around the world. The most significant negative examples are China, with more than 5 million people losing their jobs (Cheng, E., 2020) and the USA with more than 10 million citizens becoming unemployed (Weissmann, J., 2020).

COVID-19 pandemic exposes social inequalities

To this day, research suggests that most casualties due to Covid-29 pandemic will be amongst those with underlying illnesses such as high blood pressure, diabetes and heart or respiratory disease. The more disadvantaged a person is, based on socio-economic criteria, the more likely they are to suffer from these diseases, even though the can be largely preventable. Same applies to risks of mental illness, which can be aggravated by isolation, fear, and insecurity that this pandemic often causes. COVID-19 is currently exposing the existing inequalities in contemporary societies. This pandemic will most likely have the heaviest impact on the lives of the socially deprived or those facing difficult socio-economic circumstances (EuroHealthNet).

As it has already been recorded in human history, life expectancy and mortality rates have historically been apparently disproportionate between the poor and the rich. It has been estimated that the14th century’s Black Death outbreak reduced the global population by a third, while the highest number of deaths were recorded amongst the poorest populations.

Likewise, the disproportionately distributed consequences COVID-19 outbreak have already started to appear. Even though the full effects of COVID-19 are yet to be seen, it’s very likely that a potential spreading across the most fragile environments, such as conflict zones, prisons, and refugee camps will have the most devastating effects (Ahmed, F., Ahmed, N., Pissarides & Stiglitz, J., 2020).

Conclusion

COVID-19 pandemic is a very recently emerge issue that contemporary societies have been obliged to cope with, while the majority of them have been utterly underprepared. There is still much room left for further research on how this pandemic affects societies and everyday life. This attempt to indulge in the social impacts of COVID-19’s global outbreak can only observe the tip of the iceberg, as many aspects of it still remain unknown and require further study in the future. Nonetheless, it is already evident that it has already been affecting social sector in many different ways that have never been preceded in the modern era, such as social contacts and the socio-economic field. Furthermore, incidents of racism, xenophobia, fake news, misinformation and social inequalities have been on the increase. Even though the full impact of COVID-19’s pandemic remain obscure, what’s for certain is that we are on a transition point that will determine future’s social reality.

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